

Operation Agatha

Operation Agatha (Saturday, June 29, 1946) sometimes called **Black Sabbath** or **Black Saturday** because it began on the **Jewish sabbath**, was a police and military operation conducted by the **British** authorities in **Mandatory Palestine**. Soldiers and police searched for arms and made arrests in **Jerusalem**, **Tel Aviv**, and **Haifa**, and in several dozen settlements; the **Jewish Agency** was raided. The total number of British security forces involved is variously reported as 10,000, 17,000, and 25,000. About 2,700 individuals were arrested, among them future Israeli Prime Minister **Moshe Sharett**. The officially given purpose of the operation was to end “the state of anarchy” then existing in Palestine. Other objectives included obtaining documentary proof of **Jewish Agency** approval of sabotage operations by the **Palmach** and of an alliance between the **Haganah** and the more violent **Lehi** (Stern Gang) and **Irgun**, to destroy the Haganah’s military power, to boost army morale and to prevent a coup d’état being mounted by the **Lehi** and **Irgun**.^[1]

1 Background

It was a tense time. June 16, 1946 saw the “**Night of the Bridges**”, when the **Palmach** blew up eight road and rail bridges linking Palestine to neighbouring countries. On June 17, the **Lehi** attacked railway workshops in **Haifa**. Shortly afterwards, the **Irgun** kidnapped six British officers. One officer subsequently escaped and two were released. The **Irgun** announced that the remaining officers would be released only in exchange for the commutation of death sentences for two **Irgun** members.^[2]

The British Army had, for months, wanted to take military action against the Zionist underground organizations, but had been blocked by High Commissioner **Alan Cunningham**, who was also particularly opposed to military action being taken against the **Jewish Agency**. Cunningham changed his mind after the “**Night of the Bridges**” and flew to London to meet the British Cabinet and army chief Field Marshal **Bernard Montgomery** in London. Montgomery formulated the plan for Operation Agatha. With reluctance, Cunningham accepted it, hoping that, with the more militant Zionists restrained, the way would be opened to reaching a political settlement with the more moderate (and pro-British) leaders such as **Chaim Weizmann**. During the operation, in a radio broadcast, Cunningham said: “[The arrests] are not directed against the Jewish community as a whole but solely against those few who are taking an active part in the present campaign of

violence and those who are responsible for instigating and directing it ...”.^[1]

Chief of the Secretariat, Sir John Shaw, outlined the official objective of the operation at a press conference in Jerusalem: “Large-scale operations have been authorized in an effort to end the state of anarchy existing in Palestine and to enable law-abiding citizens to pursue their normal occupations without fear of kidnapping, murder, or being blown-up.” Shaw, believing that the British should end the existing situation by either partitioning Palestine into Jewish and Arab states and then leaving or dismantle the **Jewish Agency**, which claimed administrative authority yet secretly supported acts by the underground Zionist military organizations, and governing without it, approved of the operation.^[1]

Underlying the official objective were a number of others. One was to obtain documentary proof of the **Jewish Agency’s** approval of sabotage operations by the **Palmach** and of an alliance between the **Haganah** and the more violent **Lehi** (Stern Gang) and **Irgun** in carrying out violent acts. Another was to forestall a *coup d’état*. In June, members of the **Jewish Agency’s** Executive and the **Haganah** High Command had met with delegates of the **Irgun** and **Lehi** at which the latter, according to intelligence, had stated their intention of asking the **Yishuv** to participate in a *coup* “for the proclamation of a future Jewish State and the interruption of all relations with the existing Palestine Administration.” Another, in the wake of the “**Night of the Bridges**”, was to break the military power of the **Haganah**. As the **Haganah** had appeared to be acting in collusion with the **Lehi** and **Irgun**, the British authorities believed, mistakenly, that this was also necessary because the **Haganah** might co-operate with the prospective **Irgun** and **Lehi** *coup*. Lastly, Montgomery had stated that the operation was necessary in order to boost army morale.^[1]

2 Operation

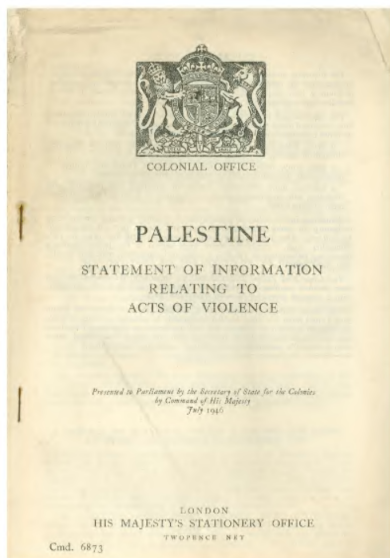
The British operations were extensive. Low flying planes circled Jerusalem. Roadblocks were maintained, trains were flagged down, and passengers were evacuated and escorted home. Special licenses were required for the operations of emergency vehicles. Curfews were imposed.

Arms caches were discovered. At Kibbutz **Yagur**, the troops found more than 300 rifles, some 100 2-inch mortars, more than 400,000 bullets, some 5,000 grenades and 78 revolvers. The arms were displayed at a press confer-

ence, and all the men of Yagur were arrested.^[3]

Agatha triggered echoes of the Holocaust in the minds of many people. Women ripped their clothing to expose concentration camp tattoos. There were incidents of people in the settlements herded into cages while screaming that this was what the Nazis did. A minority among the British troops exacerbated the situation by shouting "Heil Hitler," scrawling swastikas on walls, and referring to gas chambers while conducting searches.^[4]

3 Aftermath and consequences



British Government Statement of Information regarding recent attacks, including a summary of information gained from Operation Agatha.^[5]

After Agatha ended, the kidnapped British officers were released, and High Commissioner Alan Cunningham commuted the Irgun members' death sentences to life imprisonment.

The Haganah and Palmach were dissuaded from continued anti-British operations.^[6] However, the more extreme groups, the Lehi (Stern Gang) and the Irgun Tzvai Leumi, headed by future Prime Minister Menachem Begin, continued and even intensified their attacks.^[7]

Specifically, the Irgun retaliated for Operation Agatha by bombing the south wing of the King David Hotel, which was the headquarters of the British government in Palestine. One reason for bombing the South wing was because that was the location where it was presumed that the British had taken the documents from the Jewish Agency.



A room in Kibbutz Yagur after a weapon search conducted during Operation Agatha. From the collections of the National Library of Israel.

4 References

- [1] Clarke, Thurston, *By Blood and Fire*, Putnam, 1981, Ch.6.
- [2] The Role of Jewish Defense Organizations in Palestine
- [3] Etzel.org
- [4] Clarke, *ibid.*, pp.68-69.
- [5] Grob-Fitzgibbon, Benjamin (3 May 2011). *Imperial Endgame: Britain's Dirty Wars and the End of Empire*. Palgrave Macmillan. pp. 48-. ISBN 978-0-230-30038-5.
- [6] Alan Cunningham, "Palestine: The Last Days of the Mandate", *International Affairs* (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944), Vol. 24, No. 4 Oct. 1948, pp. 485.
- [7] Jewish Virtual Library

5 External links

- Operation Agatha
- Official British H.Q. Report on the Operation, Para-Data website, Trustees of the Airborne Forces Museum, Duxford
- Jewish Agency for Israel

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